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OO RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHEK #0282/01 0850937
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 250937Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BISHKEK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0829
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2464
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0861
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2854
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2239
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000282

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KG](#)

SUBJECT: A/DAS SPRATLEN'S MARCH 14-19 VISIT TO BISHKEK:
MEETINGS WITH THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

REF: A. BISHKEK 280

[1](#)B. BISHKEK 281

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Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) During a busy March 14-19 visit to Bishkek, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Pamela Spratlen led the second Comprehensive Policy Dialogue with Foreign Minister Karabayev (Ref A), and she witnessed the signing of Kyrgyzstan's Millennium Challenge Account Threshold Country Program assistance agreement and met with government officials responsible for the Program's implementation (Ref B). This cable reports A/DAS Spratlen's discussions of the current political climate with opposition leaders Almaz Atambayev, Bakyt Beshimov, and Omurbek Babanov of the Social Democratic Party, and with Temir Sariyev of the Ata Meken Party.

SDPK: Media is the Key Issue

[1](#)2. (C) A/DAS Spratlen met March 14 with three senior Social Democratic Party (SDPK) leaders: party chief and ex-Prime Minister Almaz Atambayev; current MP and leader of the SDPK faction in parliament, Bakyt Beshimov; and former MP Omurbek Babanov. Atambayev said the Bakiyev administration was "following the model of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan" in consolidating power. Atambayev also criticized the "radical opposition" (meaning the Ata Meken party) for missed opportunities. Referring to his appointment last April as Prime Minister, Atambayev said that the country then had been ready to adopt a "normal constitution," but the opposition did not take advantage of the "unique situation." Beshimov suggested that the Bakiyev government was pursuing only a strategy for control of political power, not a serious program for reform. He cautioned that if the government did not produce "results," there could be problems. Atambayev noted that rising prices and planned tariff increases would also stir public dissatisfaction.

13. (C) All three of the SDPK leaders said that independent television was the most important issue for political development. Atambayev said that most of the country gets only the state channel, and Internet does not have the market penetration necessary to have the same influence as television. Babanov, who previously ran NTS television, had been forced by his Russian partners to sell his stake following NTS's non-stop coverage of the November 2006 anti-government demonstrations in Bishkek. He estimated it would cost \$10-15 million to set up an independent channel, and all three urged the U.S. to support such an effort.

Sariyev: Government Continues Pressure

14. (C) On March 17, A/DAS Spratlen met with Ata Meken member and former MP Temir Sariyev, who unsurprisingly criticized the government for using strict tactics to keep opposition groups at bay. He speculated that more radical methods could be adopted by the opposition, should the government continue to block all of the "legal and peaceful" avenues preferred by opposition groups. Sariyev dismissed the notion that the people are tired of public demonstrations, characterizing it as disinformation from the government and "a few" local political analysts. He admitted that the "public parliament" does not have a clear mandate, but said that could change with time. He predicted that 20,000 people would attend the March 29, public parliament-organized "kurultai" in Bishkek, and hoped that government officials would accept their invitation to attend. When asked about the venue, Sariyev said the public parliament's organizers were refused use of the central sports stadium and the philharmonic, but would continue to search for an appropriate meeting place.

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15. (C) Sariyev said that he would take a more honest approach to governing, if given the chance. He lamented the Bakiyev administration for fighting corruption unambitiously, and called for investigating all individuals potentially involved in corrupt practices, including the president. He said that the state is losing a large amount of potential revenue due to corruption. Sariyev then referenced bribes paid by Chinese truck drivers to border and customs officials to circumvent weight restrictions and extra charges, amounting to an estimated \$6 million per month. He added that respect for authority will only come about when people begin to see that their government is working openly and in opposition to corruption. Sariyev forecast that mass demonstrations could take place only if someone would be "willing to take responsibility for the consequences." He added that the opposition could wait until the presidential elections in 2010 before taking action.

Comment

16. (C) Opposition and civil society leaders have repeatedly cited the lack of independent media as the main impediment to democratic development in Kyrgyzstan. They have also asked repeatedly for financial assistance to establish a television channel or network, but none has put forward a clear proposal.

17. (U) S/DAS Spratlen has cleared this cable.
YOVANOVITCH